

Inquiry Process

The inquiry process is just that: a process. No one model can encapsulate inquiry-based education and the range it encompasses. We are fully aware of the dangerous line we tread when we try to describe a process that is dynamic; and we must stress that any one description is not the only-or the ideal-model.

Our intention is to present some of the important aspects of inquiry that ought to be supported in a successful learning environment. For example, we should remember that inquiry often does-and should-lead to the creation of new ideas. And constructively communicating those ideas within the context of our classroom environments is central to the whole inquiry process.

That said, below you will find a basic outline of what the inquiry process includes.

Ask It begins with the desire to discover. Meaningful questions are inspired by genuine curiosity about real-world experiences. A question or a problem comes into focus at this stage, and the learner begins to define or describe what it is. Some real examples of questions in this stage in the process are:

- "What makes a poem poetry?"
- "Where do chickens come from and how does an egg 'work'?"
- "Why does the moon change shape?"

Of course, questions are redefined throughout the learning process. We never fully leave one stage and go neatly to the next. As one teacher at a recent Inquiry Workshop pointed out, "It's messy, but it works!"

Questions naturally lead to the next stage in the process: investigation.

Investigate Taking the curious impulse and putting it into action is what we call the investigation process. At this stage the learner begins to gather information: researching resources, studying, crafting an experiment, observing, or interviewing, to name a few. The learner may recast the question, refine a line of query, or plunge down a new path that the original question did not-or could not-anticipate. The information-gathering stage becomes a self-motivated process that is wholly owned by the engaged learner.

Create As the information gathered in the investigation stage begins to coalesce, the learner begins to make connections. The ability at this stage to synthesize meaning is the creative spark that forms all new knowledge. The learner now undertakes the creative task of shaping significant new thoughts, ideas, and theories outside of his/her prior experience.

Discuss At this point in the circle of inquiry, learners share their new ideas with others. The learner begins to ask others about their own experiences and investigations. Shared knowledge is a community-building process, and the meaning of their investigation begins to take on greater relevance in the context of the learner's society. Comparing notes, discussing conclusions, and sharing experiences are all examples of this process in action.

Reflect Reflection is just that: taking the time to look back at the question, the research path, and the conclusions made. The learner steps back, takes inventory, makes observations, and possibly makes new decisions. Has a solution been found? Do new questions come into light? What might those questions be?

And so it begins again; thus the circle of inquiry.

